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A study of Oscar Wilde

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A STUDY OF OSCAR WILDE

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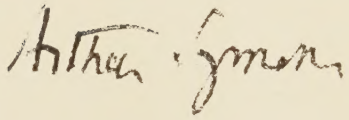

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Oscar Wilde

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A STUDY OF OSCAR WILDE

BY

ARTHUR SYMONS

Author of
'A Study of Thomas Hardy,' 'Studies in Strange Souls'

With a Portrait

LONDON
CHARLES J. SAWYER
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I

ART AND THE ENGLISH PUBLIC

NATURE, we are told, works on the principle of compensation; and in England, where we have always had a few great men, in most forms of art, and a general level hopelessly inappreciative, I seem to find a signal example of compensation. The public in England seems to me to be the least artistic and the least liberal public in the world; but that may be because I am an Englishman, and know it better than any other. On the other hand, as if to make up for this low general level, we have at intervals a man of genius—like Coleridge or Turner—who is a man of genius in a rarer and more profoundly imaginative sense than the men of genius of perhaps any other

nation. What is it that goes to the making of this unique thing, Coleridge or Turner? Are not the vast masses of the public like the wizard's ingredients in the magic brew, in which the sacrifice of a thousand lives has brought into existence one drop, but of the elixir of life? In England no work of art is bought or admired for its own sake by more than one person in a thousand. No one goes to the theatre to see a play because it is a great play, but because it is acted by some famous actor and because it has been advertised how many thousand pounds have been spent on its production. People go to see Shakespeare, it is true, as they go to church on Sundays, because it is the proper thing to do. They used to go to the Joachim Quartette Concerts for the same reason; but it seems to me that there is one art which in England finds some natural response in the public,

the art of music. We have had great writers, and have no general feeling for literature; great painters, and no taste in pictures; but with our one great musician, Purcell, we seem really to have an instinctive love of music. Compensation again: the general level higher, and the exceptional production, as a consequence, lowered or infrequent.

We have no body of ideas, no general principles of art, no schools, no groups, only individuals. Words like 'Symbolism,' 'Naturalism,' even 'Romanticism,' are foreign to our soil, and when they reach it are handed about like curiosities. We have good writers and bad writers: that is all. We had Carlyle once, who was a prophet, and Ruskin, who was a priest; we have had Swinburne, who was a voice for ecstasy, and Meredith, who was the voice of pure intellect, and Hardy, who was the voice of the

earth. But in England we have no equivalent for a Maeterlinck, a Maurice Barrès; we have no great intellects disinterestedly at work on ideas.

I think for actual production we can hold our own. I have named one great poet, Swinburne, who belonged to a generation now nearly extinct, and Swinburne, besides his lyric inspiration, had a technique more varied than Shelley's, more miraculous than Hugo's. We had in Robert Bridges a lyric poet who may be compared with Henri de Régnier for a quality of thoughtful and exquisite charm. Yeats has brought a wild magic over from Ireland, and is our only conscious Symbolist (all poets are unconscious Symbolists). We have accomplished poets in Sir William Watson and Mr Binyon, we have had at least one vigorous poet—John Davidson, and one poet of strange harmonies—Francis Thompson. Besides

Meredith—a Stendhal speaking through themouth of Mallarmé—and Hardy, who created English peasants that are the descendants of the peasants of Shakespeare, we have Rudyard Kipling, who has as many of the merits as of the defects of Dickens, and who has caricatured the English character with admirable skill and without knowing that he was a national satirist. We had Joseph Conrad, who brought out of Poland a new, brooding, mysterious quality into English literature; and Maurice Hewlett, a Dumas of the middle ages, turned *précieux*. We have had Henry James, who was a continental American in love with England, a mysterious artist, less like Bourget than any living writer, and George Moore, not at all like Zola, who was once our only realist, and who will always remain the Irishman in love with France. We have George Bernard Shaw,

who has scoffed at the British public so seriously that the public is beginning to accept him as its licensed jester, not in the least understanding what he means. We have in Max Beerbohm a dainty sharp-shooter, whose arrows fly at random but never miss. But of all these energies, no two are working in the same direction, or working with the same aims; they are scarcely conscious of one another's existence, and if any one of them is to characterise a period, all the others will have to come in as exceptions.

There has been in Ireland a little dramatic movement which was one of the chief signs of life in contemporary British letters; and there was one actor in it who was a great comic actor, and another who was the only man then capable of speaking verse on the English stage. When these actors first came over to London with their pieces, not three critics

in London took the trouble to go and see them. There was a new farce or a new musical comedy at one of the big theatres; and the critics could not be spared to go and see a play of Yeats or Synge, and this witty and poetical acting, because the public, too, was at the farce or the comedy.

It is true that people here and there are beginning to remember that there is such a thing as poetry, and that the stage is its temple. Many years ago Philip Carr gave occasional performances of Elizabethan plays, forgotten masterpieces, in the name of a vague Mermaid Society which has never had any practical existence. He has always been on the verge of failure, because he has not been able to persuade more than a handful of people to come to his performances. Other attempts have been made; *La Révolte* of Villiers de l'Isle-Adam has been acted, and Wilde's *Salome* has been

privately acted, the last time by a society which aims at giving beautiful things, old and new, in a simple and beautiful way. And we have had one man with a genius for stagecraft, a man who has invented a new art of the stage, a decoration which is wholly unreal and suggestive: the son of Ellen Terry, Gordon Craig. And he, having failed to persuade managers or the public that he was the one and only master of the feast, left us and went abroad, where he was better understood.

So far this movement towards bringing poetry back to the stage has been a failure, and it has as its natural enemy the most brilliant of our playwrights, Bernard Shaw. Mr Shaw is on the side of science, of the new morality, of all the improvements. He represents, with more wit and independence than anyone else, and with more destructive value, the age

of prose which some of us think is condemned to pass. All that is most genuine in his qualities makes him an obstacle rather than a help to any imaginative movement. On the other side, on the side of art, people are coming to set up that other Irishman, Oscar Wilde, and it is with his one serious play that a new 'literary drama' society makes its chief appeal. No one was ever more anxious to be an artist than Wilde, but it was not when he was serious that he was an artist. He will live by his comedies, and yet it is *Salome* that people want to wave as the banner of art for art.

The position of Wilde as it was at the time of his trial and as it was after his punishment affords a curious indication of that invariably irrational swing of the pendulum which marks time for the British public. I remember that before judgment had been passed the English

newspapers were speaking of 'the man Wilde,' and on the announcement of one of his plays outside a famous theatre the name of the author was discreetly obliterated by a piece of blank paper. After judgment had been passed no English newspaper would speak of him at all; and the plays disappeared from the theatres for a long time. It was considered advisable, on a playbill, to put 'by the author of *Lady Windermere's Fan*.' His plays were rarely acted. It seems, indeed, as if Oscar Wilde had, as it were, arisen out of his grave, to enjoy the posthumous honours of his supreme irony, without even the glamour of an aureole; the people who were his enemies on moral grounds now make amends by exalting him beyond his merits on literary grounds, and the insincere romanticism which flowered in *Salome* and the poems and so many of the essays is taken on

trust as if the personal tragedy had transubstantiated it into truth and sincerity.

Such are the perils of the arts in England; so helplessly does the pendulum swing. How many people over here will ever realise that *The Soul of Man under Socialism* is not in the least a better piece of literature because its author afterwards stood in the dock; and that *De Profundis* is also not in the least better because its author had already stood in the dock? I see these confusions even in the minds of men of letters: how much more does one realise them in the unreasoning minds of the crowd, that can distinguish nothing by its essence, only by its accidents! That justice is done, sooner or later, to all great work, is a necessity of all great work, the insistence of its 'will to live,' and nothing at all to the credit of any public. Justice rarely comes until it is too late to give much

help or satisfaction to those who in course of time inherit it. Thomas Hardy, until 1900 or so, was looked upon as a popular novelist, but scarcely as a man of letters. Walter Pater, during his whole lifetime, saw only three of his books pass into a second edition, and when he died his death was hardly even mentioned by the newspapers that had given columns to Robert Louis Stevenson. Now he is tacitly accepted as a classic, and Stevenson is gradually taking his place as the most charming of story-tellers for boys. All that has come about because a few people of intelligence have seen the truth from the beginning, and have repeated it to a few more people of intelligence, until the public comes to believe what it has heard repeated so many times.

Can any other public, I wonder, be as incapable as the English public of taking a work of art as a work of art, and not

asking it to be anything else? I ask myself whether this lack of instinct in a race which has the instinct of creation can be an actual dislike of beauty, due to Puritan influences, or a mere inattention to beauty, due to the hasty Imperialism which was devouring the energies of the country.

II

INTENTIONS

'I CANNOT but be conscious,' said Wilde in one of his essays in *Intentions*, 'that we are born in an age when only the dull are treated seriously, and I live in terror of not being misunderstood.' To be precisely accurate, it was one of the characters in a dialogue who made this remark. It was no doubt meant to have a personal application—it certainly has. Wilde was much too brilliant ever to be believed; he was much too witty ever to be taken seriously. A passion for caprice, a whimsical Irish temperament, a love of art for art's sake—it is in qualities such as these that we find the origin of the beautiful farce of æstheticism, the exquisite echoes of the *Poems*, the subtle decadence of *Dorian Gray*, and the paradoxical

truths, the perverted common-sense, of *Intentions*. Wilde, with a most reasonable hatred of the *bourgeois* seriousness of dull people, always took refuge from the commonplace in irony. Intentionally or not—scarcely without intention—he gained a reputation for frivolity which does injustice to a writer who was at least always serious in the reality of his devotion to art. The better part of *Intentions* is simply a plea for the dignity, an argument for the supremacy, of imaginative art.

The first essay, *The Decay of Lying*, is a protest against realism—against 'the monstrous worship of facts.' It presents certain æsthetic doctrines which Wilde probably partly believed. We are told, for example, that 'Art never expresses anything but itself. It has an independent life, just as Thought has, and develops purely on its own lines.

All bad art comes from returning to Life and Nature, and elevating them into ideals. Life and Nature may sometimes be used as part of Art's rough material, but before they are of any real service to Art, they must be translated into artistic conventions. Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates Life. It follows, as a corollary from this, that external Nature also imitates Art. The only effects that she can show us are effects that we have already seen through poetry, or in paintings. The final revelation is that Lying, the telling of beautiful untrue things, is the proper aim of Art.' All this, startling as it sounded at the time, needs only to be properly apprehended, to be properly analysed, and we get an old doctrine, indeed, but a doctrine in which there is a great deal of sanity and a perfectly reasonable view of things. The two long

dialogues called *The Critic as Artist* present a theory of criticism which might certainly be justified by the practice of some of the most perfect among critical writers. 'To the critic,' we are told, 'the work of art is simply a suggestion for a new work of his own, that need not necessarily bear any obvious resemblance to the thing it criticises. The one characteristic of a beautiful form is that one can put into it whatever one wishes, and see in it whatever one chooses to see; and the beauty, that gives to creation its universal and æsthetic element, makes the critic a creator in his turn, and whispers of a thousand different things which were not present in the mind of him who carved the statue or painted the panel or graved the gem.' The essay on *The Truth of Masks* is a learned argument from Shakespeare in favour of the beautiful and appropriate use of archæology

in the mounting of the Shakespearian drama—an argument which seems to us obviously just, in spite of the warning with which it concludes: 'Not that I agree with everything that I have said in this essay. There is much with which I entirely disagree. The essay simply represents an artistic standpoint, and in æsthetic criticism attitude is everything.' Then, finally, there is a paper on Wainewright, the artist, in *Pen, Pencil, and Poison*, a paper which suffers from the lack of intrinsic interest in its subject. A pretentious, affected writer does not become interesting merely because he commits a murder.

The book has curious convolutions of sentiment, intricacies of mood and manner, and a masquerade of disguises. Wilde is always suggestive; he is interesting even when he is provoking. At his best, when he is most himself—an artist in

epigram—he can be admirable even when his eloquence reminds us of the eloquent writing of others. He is conscious of the charm of graceful echoes, and is always original in his quotations. His criticism is often just as well as amusing: over and over again he proves to us the truth of masks. By constantly saying the opposite of sensible opinions he proves to us that opposites can often be equally true. While he insists on producing his paradox, sometimes for no other reason than that it is a paradox, and because he would rather say something that is clever than something that is merely true, it is surprising how often he contrives to illustrate a mathematical figure by an intellectual somersault, and how often he succeeds in combining truth and cleverness. After achieving a reputation by doing nothing, he came into a fair way to beat his own record by real achieve-

ments. He is a typical figure, alike in the art of life and the art of literature, and, if he might be supposed for a moment to represent anything but himself, he would be the perfect representative of all that is meant by the word 'Decadence' as used in the ''nineties' of last century and the 'noughts' of this.

III

THE BALLAD OF READING GAOL

THE Ballad of Reading Gaol is written in that ballad stanza of six lines which Hood used for *The Dream of Eugene Aram*; and the accident of two poems about a murderer having been written in the same metre suggested comparisons which are only interesting by way of contrast. *Eugene Aram* is a purely romantic poem; *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* aims at being realistic. It may more properly be compared with Henley's *In Hospital*, where a personal experience, and personally observed surroundings, are put into verse as directly, and with as much precise detail, as possible. Taken merely as sensation recorded, Wilde's poem is as convincing, holds you as tightly, as

Henley's; and it has, in places, touches at least as finely imaginative; this, for instance:

> We have little care of prison fare,
> For what chills and kills outright
> Is that every stone one lifts by day
> Becomes one's heart by night.

But, unlike Henley's, it did not find a new form for the record of these sensations, so new to poetry; it did not entirely escape 'poetic diction' in its language, and it accepted what had long become the artificial structure of the ballad, without making any particular effort to use the special advantages of that structure. But then this is just because a romantic artist was working on realistic material.

This poem, then, is partly a plea on behalf of prison reform; and, so far as it is written with that aim, it is not art. It is also to some extent an endeavour to do

in poetry what can only be done in prose; and thus such intensely impressive touches as the quicklime which the prisoners see on the boots of the warders who have been digging the hanged man's grave, the 'gardener's gloves' of the hangman, and his 'little bag,' are, strictly speaking, fine prose, not poetry. But, it must not be forgotten, all these things go to the making of a piece of work, in which, beyond its purely literary quality, there is a real value of a personal kind—the value of almost raw fact, the value of the document. And here, too, begins to come in, in an odd, twisted way, the literary quality. For the poem is not really a ballad at all, but a sombre, angry, interrupted reverie; and it is the sub-current of meditation, it is the asides which count, not the story, as a story, of the drunken soldier who was hanged for killing a woman. The real drama is the

drama of that one of 'the souls in pain' who tramp round the prison-yard to whom the hanging of a man meant most—

> For he who lives more lives than one
> More deaths than one must die.

It is because they are seen through his at once grieved and self-pitying consciousness that all those sorry details become significant—

> We tore the tarry rope to shreds
> With blunt and bleeding nails;
> We rubbed the doors, and scrubbed the floors,
> And cleaned the shining rails:
> And, rank by rank, we soaped the plank,
> And clattered with the pails.

And the glimmerings of romance which come into these pages, like the flowers which may not grow out of the dead man's body as he lies under the asphalt of

the prison-yard, are significant because they show us the persistence with which temperament will assert itself. One sees beauty claiming its own in a story meant to be so sordid, so veracious, so prosaically close to fact; and having, indeed, so many of the qualities at which it aims.

And there is also something else in the poem: a central idea, half, but not more than half, a paradox—that 'all men kill the thing they love.' This symbol of the obscure deaths of the heart, the unseen violence upon souls, the martyrdom of hope, trust, and all the more helpless among the virtues, is what gives its unity, in a certain philosophic purpose, to a poem not otherwise quite homogeneous.

The Ballad of Reading Gaol belongs to the summer of 1897; a fortunate conjuncture of circumstances—the prison discipline excluding all sense-indulgence —gave him joy and hope in the work;

so that for a few brief months he was enabled to do better than his best. Wilde assured Frank Harris that the conception of the poem came to him in prison and was due to the alleviation of his punishment—a divine fruit born directly of his pity. The *Ballad* was finished in Naples, and Alfred Douglas has since declared that he helped Oscar Wilde to write it. 'The poem,' said Harris, 'was conceived in prison, and a good deal of it was printed before Oscar Wilde went near Douglas, and some part of the best stanzas in it are to be found in this earlier portion: no part of the credit of it, in my opinion, belongs to Douglas.' In *Oscar Wilde and Myself* Douglas states, when they are staying at the Villa Giudice, that 'The truth is that Wilde consistently made free use of such gifts as I possessed, that I assisted him to many a piece of dialogue and many a jibe which has

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helped to make him famous, and that I gave him very material aid and counsel in the matter of *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*. There are passages in the latter poem which he lifted *nolens-volens* from a poem of my own, and it must be remembered that, while up to the time that he left Reading Gaol he had affected some scorn of the ballad form and knew next to nothing of its possibilities, I had given a great amount of attention to the study of that form and had produced *The Ballad of Perkin Warbeck* and *The Ballad of St Vitus*, which Wilde read for the first time in Naples, and with which he was mightily impressed. Wilde owes just as much to me as I owe to him and, for that matter, a great deal more. I have written neither plays nor poems which embody a single word or phrase of his, and I never took a literary hint from him in my life. He has done me the honour

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to use a great deal of Alfred Douglas, and he is perfectly welcome. All I ask is, that I might not be maligned in consequence.'

This fact must be realised: that what Wilde endured for the greater part of his term in his prison seems incredible in regard to the infinite refinements of the punishment inflicted upon him, and that after his release he only produced this poem and *De Profundis*. In Marlowe's *Edward the Second* the king says to his murderer:

And there, in mire and puddle have I stood
This ten days' space; and lest that I should sleep,
One plays continually upon a drum.
They give me bread and water, being a King;
So that, for want of sleep and sustenance,
My mind's distempered and my body's numbed,
And whether I have limbs or no, I know not.

Now turn from these pitiable lines which show the insane tortures of a sane king and read some sentences of what Wilde said to Harris: then compare the verse with the poem. 'At first it was a fiendish nightmare; more horrible than anything I had dreamed of; from the first evening when they made one undress before them and get into some filthy water they called a bath and dry myself with a damp brown rag and put on this livery of shame. The cell was appalling: I could hardly breathe in it, and the food turned my stomach. Surely like Dante I have written in my face the fact that I have been in hell. Only Dante never imagined any hell like our English prison. I am perpetually punished for nothing. There is a punishment more terrible than the rack. They can drive you mad in a week.' He refers to the solitary confinement in a dark cell. To this Harris adds:

'For these tortures were all physical, whereas the modern Englishman addresses himself to the brain and the nerves, and finds the fear of madness more terrifying than the fear of pain.' Wilde implores Harris not to repeat what he has said, 'When if you resist they drive you crazy.' 'I felt guilty,' wrote Harris, 'his insistence, his gasping fear, showed me how terribly he had suffered. He was beside himself with dread.' Then: 'You shall have writing materials and your books, Oscar.' At that the old smile came back into his eyes, the deathless humour.

Harris states that some of his inspiration may have been derived from *A Shropshire Lad* of A. E. Housman; and that one ballad in that book made a deep impression on him. It is the ninth poem in the book (in the first edition, 1896), beginning, 'On moonlit heath and lone-

some bank '—the verses about the gallows site where men formerly hung in chains, and the hangings in Shrewsbury jail. Put this beside Wilde's lines that start from 'And as one sees most fearful things.' Any comparison is certainly in Wilde's favour, both in his choice of this poem, which can grip on a man's soul, perhaps, or at least on his body, with almost the strength of a vice, and in the passion and the pity and the horror and the intense sense of suspense with which he thrills the imagination. Harris says that *Reading Gaol* is 'beyond all comparison the greatest ballad in English: one of the noblest poems in our language.' Here, I think, he certainly exaggerates.

Rossetti's *Sister Helen* is to be ranked with those supreme efforts of human imagination which are a possession for all time—just as a poem of a different kind of imaginative power, Tennyson's

Rizpah, shows a mastery over the eternal sources of pity and terror which not the greatest masters have excelled. Higher effect was never wrought out of the old traditions of witchcraft; it is an agonizing tragedy vizualised of the 'terrible Love turned to Hate, perhaps the deadliest of all passions and woven complexities,' and by pure magic, on a small space of the earth, that exists between Hell and Heaven. Swinburne wrote: 'It is out of all sight or thought of comparison the greatest ballad in modern English; and perhaps not very far below it, and certainly in a high place among the attempts in that way of Englishmen, we might class George Meredith's pathetic and splendid poem of *Margaret's Bridal Eve*.' Here is one stanza:

The old grey mother she thrummed on her knee:
There is a rose that's ready;

And which of the handsome young men shall
it be?
There's a rose that's ready for clipping.

The form of the ballad has often changed both in regard to the form and to the metre. The *Ballade* was originally a dance-song; in its commonest form it consists of three strophes of eight or ten lines each, written in identical rhymes, as is also the *envoi* which terminates the poem. If the *ballade* is written in decasyllabic lines, the strophes are ordinarily of ten lines, and the *envoi* of five; if, on the other hand, the octosyllabic line is used, the strophes are ordinarily of eight lines and the *envoi* of four. Elaborated in the fourteenth century by Guillaume de Machaut and his school, it was cultivated for two hundred years without any interruption till the rise of the *Pleiade*. Villon's ballads, single and double, are simply magnificent; the sheer creations

of a man of enormous genius. There has been no greater artist in French verse, as there has been no greater poet; and the main part of the history of poetry in France is the record of a long forgetting of all that Villon found out for himself.

In 1829 Thomas Hood struck a note more intimately his own than he had before in *The Dream of Eugene Aram*, a poem of strange fascination, which exhibits an extraordinary faculty for 'moving a horror skilfully' and laying bare the tortured human heart. This ballad is a masterpiece of horrors, and in it Hood perfects that style which has an emphasis far beyond epigram, because it comes straight from the heart and carries with it an awful inwardness of thought. When, here, he says,

> A dozen times I groaned; the dead
> Had never groaned but twice,

there is the same calibre and quality as in the moral reflection of *The Song of the Shirt*,

> O! God! that bread should be so dear,
> And flesh and blood so cheap!

Since *The Ancient Mariner* there has been no such spiritual fear in our poetry; and the nightmare comes to us as if out of our own bed, the sensations translate themselves into our own nerves. The words reach us like a whisper, from which it is impossible to escape. That imagination, which had hardly shown itself among the thick clouds of fancy in all the other poems, is here, deadly, beautiful, and naked.

Consider these stanzas:

> The Usher took six hasty strides,
> As smit with sudden pain,—
> Six hasty strides beyond the place,
> Then slowly back again;

And down he sat beside the lad,
And talk'd with him of Cain.

And how the sprites of injur'd men
Shriek upward from the sod,—
Aye, how the ghostly hand will point
To show the burial clod;
And unknown facts of guilty acts
Are seen in dreams from God!

Compare these with the two stanzas of Wilde's which begin:

And he of the swollen purple throat,
And the stark and staring eyes.

This is the highest height Oscar Wilde —a Pagan by preference and a Greek born out of due time—ever achieved, and alas! he only trod the summit for a moment. Now, what was that moment? What were other moments in his life just then? The crucial moments, when his soul was at stake between good and evil.

Yet, in poets who have loved and

adored shapes of horror and shapes of fear, I find something akin in these poets and in Baudelaire, who was not more amorous of corruption than Beddoes, and in Poe, who was not more spellbound by the scent of the graveyard earth. So, as Beddoes became the chronicler of the ridicule and the praise of death, all these, I think, were 'tired of being merely human,' were at times occupied with confessed phantoms —who were never intended to be human, except in the wizard humanity of death.

Wilde had—as Swinburne had—an immense admiration for Baudelaire; he would have found in the most passionate and sombre poems of Christina Rossetti's a certain fascination in the thought of death, almost such a fascination as it had for Leopardi and for Baudelaire; only it is not the fascination of attraction, as with the one, nor of repulsion, as with the other, but of interest in what the dead are

doing underground, in their memories, if memories they have, of the wise and mad world they have left; a singular and whimsical sympathy with the poor obscure dead, like that expressed in two famous lines of *Les Fleurs du Mal.* So Wilde might have admired these sentences of a more modern writer. 'Having pondered over the carvings of ivory, or having found wonder in the dark womb of curious vessels, one asks the same questions—the same terrible questions that one seeks so vainly from the gaudy poppies at noonday, or from the curved flight of the eagles. Can we attempt to chronicle eternity by the folly of a day? But then each century had vampire blood, and sought for the veins of past centuries as a vampire for its own veins. Who can in solitude take the Sphinx unto himself—to espouse the vampire? It is the scented harlot who says: "I symbolise

mine own virginity, and, by renunciation, enter among the concubines of God."'

Harris says of Beardsley that the curious thing about him was 'that he expressed the passions of pride and lust and cruelty more intensely even than Rops.' One night when they were in the Café Royal Wilde said: 'Absinthe is to all other drinks what Aubrey's drawings are to other pictures: it stands alone: it is like nothing else: it shimmers like southern twilight in opalescent colouring: it has about it the seduction of strange sins. It is just like your drawings, Aubrey; it gets on one's nerves and is cruel. Baudelaire called his poems *Fleurs du Mal*, I shall call your drawings *Fleurs du Péché*—flowers of Sin.'

Ideas were never what the writer of the poem was lacking in; but an idea so simple and so human, developed out of

circumstances so actual, so close to the earth, is singularly novel. And, whatever we may think of the positive value of this very powerful piece of writing, there can be no doubt as to its relative value in a career which seemed then to be at a turning-point.

When *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* was published, it seemed to some people that such a return to, or so startling a first acquaintance with, real things was precisely what was most required to bring into relation, both with life and art, an extraordinary talent, so little in relation with matters of common experience, so fantastically alone in a region of intellectual abstractions. In this poem, where a style formed on other lines seems startled at finding itself used for such new purposes, we see a great spectacular intellect to which, at last, pity and terror have come in their own person, and no

longer as puppets in a play. In its sight, human life has always been something acted on the stage; a comedy in which it is the wise man's part to sit aside and laugh, but in which he may also disdainfully take part, as in a carnival, under any mask. The unbiased, scornful intellect, to which humanity has never been a burden, comes now to be unable to sit aside and laugh, and it has worn and looked behind so many masks that there is nothing left desirable in illusion. Having seen, as the artist sees, further than morality, but with so partial an eyesight as to have overlooked it on the way, it has come at length to discover morality in the only way left possible, for itself. And, like most of those who, having 'thought themselves weary,' have made the adventure of putting thought into action, it has had to discover it sorrowfully, at its own incalculable expense.

And now, having become so newly acquainted with what is pitiful, and what seems most unjust, in the arrangement of mortal affairs, it has gone, not unnaturally, to an extreme and taken, on the one hand, humanitarianism, on the other realism, at more than their just valuation in matters of art. It is that odd instinct of the intellect, the necessity to carry things to their furthest point of development, to be more logical than either life or art, two very wayward and illogical things, in which conclusions do not always follow from premises.

Well, and nothing followed, after this turning-point, as it seemed, in a career. 'Whatever actually occurs is spoiled for art,' Oscar Wilde had said. One hoped, but he had known at least himself, from the beginning. Nothing followed. Wit remained, to the very end, the least personal form of speech, and thus the

kindest refuge for one who had never loved facts in themselves. 'I am dying beyond my means' was the last word of his which was repeated to me.

His intellect was dramatic, and the whole man was not so much a personality as an attitude. Without being a sage, he maintained the attitude of a sage; without being a poet, he maintained the attitude of a poet; without being an artist, he maintained the attitude of an artist. And it was precisely in his attitudes that he was most sincere. They represented his intentions; they stood for the better, unrealised part of himself. Thus his attitude, towards life and towards art, was untouched by his conduct; his perfectly just and essentially dignified assertion of the artist's place in the world of thought and the place of beauty in the material world being in no wise invalidated by his own failure to create pure beauty

or to become a quite honest artist. A talent so vividly at work as to be almost genius was incessantly urging him into action, mental action. Just as the appropriate word always came to his lips, so the appropriate attitude always found him ready to step into it, as into his own shadow. His mind was eminently reasonable, and if you look closely into his wit, you will find that it has always a basis of logic, though it may indeed most probably be supported by its apex at the instant in which he presents it to you. Of the purely poetical quality he had almost nothing; his style, even in prose, becomes insincere, a bewildering echo of Pater or of some French writer whenever he tries to write beautifully. Such imagination as he had was like the flickering of light along an electric wire, struck by friction out of something direct and hard, and, after all, only on the surface.

'But then it is only the Philistine,' he said in his essay on Wainewright, 'who seeks to estimate a personality by the vulgar test of production. This young dandy sought to be somebody rather than to do something. He recognised that Life itself is an art, and has its modes of style no less than the arts that seek to express it.' Art and life are to be two things, absolutely apart, each a thing made to a pattern, not a natural or, as he would take it to be, an accidental, growth. It is the old principle of art for art's sake, pushed to its furthest limits, where every truth sways over into falsehood. He tells us that 'the highest art rejects the burden of the human spirit, and gains more from a new medium or a fresh material than one does from any enthusiasm for art, or from any lofty passion, or from any fresh awakening of the human consciousness.' But he forgets that he is

only discussing technique, and that faultless technique, though art cannot exist without it, is not art.

And so with regard to life. Realising as he did that it is possible to be very watchfully cognisant of the 'quality of our moments as they pass,' and to shape them after one's own ideal much more continuously and consciously than most people have ever thought of trying to do, he made for himself many souls, souls of intricate pattern and elaborate colour, webbed into infinite tiny cells, each the home of a strange perfume, perhaps a poison. Every soul had its own secret, and was secluded from the soul which had gone before it or was to come after it. And this showman of souls was not always aware that he was juggling with real things, for to him they were no more than the coloured glass balls which the juggler keeps in the air, catching them

one after another. For the most part the souls were content to be playthings; now and again they took a malicious revenge, and became so real that even the juggler was aware of it. But when they became too real he had to go on throwing them into the air and catching them, even though the skill of the game had lost its interest for him. But as he never lost his self-possession his audience, the world, did not see the difference.

Among these souls there was one after the fashion of Flaubert, another after the fashion of Pater, others that had known Baudelaire, and Huysmans, and De Quincey, and Swinburne. Each was taken up, used, and dropped, as in a kind of persistent illustration of 'the truth of masks.' 'A truth in art is that whose contradictory is also true.' Well, it was with no sense of contradiction that the critic of beautiful things found himself

appealing frankly to the public in a series of the wittiest plays that have been seen on the modern stage. It was another attitude, that was all; something external, done for its own sake, 'expressing nothing but itself,' and expressing, as it happened by accident, precisely what he himself was best able to express.

IV

DORIAN GRAY

THE Picture of Dorian Gray (1891) is partly made out of Wilde himself, partly out of two other men, both of whom are alive. Not being creative he was cruel enough to mix his somewhat poisonous colour after the fashion of an impressionistic painter, and so to give a treble reflection of three different temperaments instead of giving one. In any case, as Pater wrote: 'Dorian himself, though a quite unsuccessful experiment in Epicureanism, in life as a fine art, is (till his inward spoiling takes visible effect suddenly, and in a moment, at the end of his story) a beautiful creature.'

His peculiar kind of beauty might be imaged by a strangely coloured Eastern

vessel, and hidden within it a few delicate young serpents. For he has something of the coiled-up life of the serpents in his poisonous sins; sins he communicates to others, ruining their youthful lives with no deliberate malice, but simply because he cannot help it. He has no sense of shame, even in his most ignoble nights. Sin is a thing that writes itself across a man's face; but secret vices cannot be concealed; one sees them in the mere ironical curl of sinister lips, or in the enigmatical lifting of an eyelid. He has made the devil's bargain, but not in the sense in which Faustus sells his soul to Satan; yet he is always entangled in the painted sins, the more and more hideous aspects, of his intolerably accusing portrait, taken, certainly, in Wilde's usual manner, from *La Peau de Chagrin* of Balzac; only, and therein lies the immense difference,

the man's life never shrinks, but the very lines and colours of his painted image shrivel, until the thing itself—the thing he has come to hate as one hates hell—has its revenge.

A passion for caprice, a whimsical Irish temperament, a love of art for art's sake—it is in such qualities as these that I find the origin of the beautiful force of æstheticism, the exquisite echoes of the poems, the subtle decadence of *Dorian Gray*, and the paradoxical truths, the perverted common sense of the *Intentions*. Certainly, as Pater realised, Wilde, with his hatred of the bourgeois seriousness of dull people, has always taken refuge from commonplace in irony. Life, to him, even when he is most frivolous, ought not to be realism, but a following after art: a provoking enough phrase for those who are lost to the sense of suggestiveness. He is conscious of the

charm of grateful echoes, and is always original in his quotations.

Mr Ransome in his book on Wilde, which is subtle and original, wrote: 'There are a few strange books that share the magic of some names, like Cornelius Agrippa, Raymond Lully, and Paracelsus, names that possibly mean more to us before than after we have investigated the works and personalities that lie behind them. These books are mysterious and kept, like mysteries, for peculiar moods. *Dorian Gray*, for all its faults, is such a book. It is a mosaic hurriedly made by a man who reached out in all directions and took and used in his book whatever scraps of jasper or porphyry or broken flint were put into his hand; and that is not a virtue. But in it there is an individual essence, a private perfume, a colour whose secret has been lost. There are moods whose

consciousness that essence, perfume, colour is needed to intensify.'

It goes without saying that this book had many origins, Wilde being rarely, if ever, creative. The chief origin is *À Rebours* of Huysmans, his masterpiece, but like most of his other works not in the strict sense of the word a novel. It is the Breviary of the Decadence. It is an amazing study in Pathology. It is abnormal and perverse and monstrous. It was wrought out of the writer's excited nerves. Des Esseintes was suggested, I imagine, but only suggested, by Montesquiou-Fezensac and, apart from this, the creation of a brain and of an imagination that were, like the man himself, when I was with him in Paris, intensely restless and morbid and feverish and sublimely contemptuous. Wilde refers to this book, but without naming it, admitting that, besides its complication

and deliquescence, it is poisonous. 'The heavy odour of incense seemed to cling about its pages and to trouble the brain. The mere cadence of the sentences, the subtle monotony of their music, so full as it were of complex refrains and movements elaborately repeated, produced on the mind of Dorian, as he passed from chapter to chapter, a form of reverie, a malady of dreaming, that made him unconscious of the falling day and the creeping shadows.' And in this sentence he defines a quality which was born in both writers: 'There were in it metaphors as monstrous as orchids, and as evil in colour.'

Walter Pater, that creative critic, was right in saying: 'The interest of *Dorian Gray* turns on a very old theme, old because based on some inherent experience or fancy of the human brain, of a double life: not of two persons, in this

case, but of the man and his portrait; the latter of which changes, decays, is spoiled, while the former, through a long course of corruption, remains to the outward eye unchanged, still in all its beauty of a seemingly immaculate youth —"the devil's bargain." Wilde's work may fairly claim to go with that of Edgar Poe, and with some good French work of the same kind, done, probably, in more or less conscious imitation of it.' How subtly ironical is that last touch with which he ends his review! From my own point of view I cannot understand why Pater compared this story with one of Poe's. Poe's genius has often been misunderstood, and he still remains a kind of enigma. He never dived very deeply into any heart but his own. His women are mere ghosts, curiously lacking in flesh and blood. Are not most of his men malign, perverse,

atrocious, abnormal, never quite normal evocations of himself? He wrote with all his nerves, and there is something demoniacal in his imagination. Yet, unlike almost every man of genius, he had no strength of will; he had not enough grip on his constitution to live wisely, to live well. And he was a doomed man.

Baudelaire, after leaving (March 1856) his rooms in the Rue d'Angoûleme-du-Temple, found himself again facing the Seine in the Hôtel Voltaire, 19 Quai Voltaire; he arrived there in July and remained there for three years. Dining there one night, I found it an old-fashioned hotel, with a traditional past behind it: for in this hotel Baudelaire entertained Gautier, Wagner, Banville, Poulet-Malassis, Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, Flaubert, Courbet, Manet, and Delacroix. There he wrote some of his finest prose

and at least three volumes of his translations from Poe. Oscar Wilde once told me that, tempted by the name of that hotel and by that of Baudelaire, he went there in 1874 and after that in 1883, where he met some of the best known people of the day. One of his biographers tells us that, impressed equally by Balzac's energy as by his genius, he wore, while working, a white robe with a hood, drinking hot coffee and creating what he wrongly supposed was his fiery world. And again, with that vanity which was his, and rightly so, he also walked with an ivory stick, set with turquoises, like the stick that pleased Balzac because it set the town talking. André Gide wrote: 'Wilde ne causait pas: il contait. Durant presque le repas, il n'arrêta pas de conter. Il contait doucement, lentement; sa voix même était merveilleuse. Il savait ad-

mirablement le français, mais feignait de chercher un peu les mots qu'il voulait faire attendre. Les contes qu'il nous dit interminablement ce soir-là étaient confus et pas de ses meilleurs. Wilde, incertain de nous, nous essayait. Et comme il s'occupait d'abord d'amuser, beaucoup de ceux qui crurent le connaître n'auront connu de lui que l'amuseur.'

Before certain people Wilde would assume, to use a French phrase, 'un masque de parade,' his intention being to astonish and amuse and exasperate them. He never listened, and he never took the least notice of any thought unless it was his own. He was always at his best when one was alone with him. He was almost always effective, never reflective. He often seemed to me to make use of his effectiveness like an actor when he makes parade of his part. He had the

voice and at times the gestures of the born actor. In fact he often played his parts too effectively both in private and in public. One never knew what he would say next, no more did he.

Whistler, whom I knew for many years, was a great wit, and his wit was a personal expression. Stupidity hurt him, and he avenged himself for the pain. All his laughter was a crackling of thorns under the pot, but of flaming thorns, seething the pot in a fury of boiling. And his voice, with its strange accents, part tuned to the key of his wit, was not less personal or significant. He had a whole language of pauses, in the middle of a word or of a sentence, with all kinds of whimsical quotation marks, setting a mocking emphasis on solemn follies. He was a great wit, really spontaneous, so far as what is intellectual can ever be spontaneous. His wit was

not, as with Oscar Wilde, a brilliant sudden gymnastic, with words in which the phrase itself was always worth more than what it said: it was a wit of ideas, in which the thing said was at least on the level of the way of saying it. And, with him, it was really a weapon used as seriously as any rapier in an eternal duel with an eternal enemy.

Now Wilde had a brilliant career behind him and before him. I am compelled to quote this sentence of Swinburne in support of my statement. 'Heine, that snake of the Hebrew Paradise, "a smooth-lipped serpent, surely highly inspired," was never more truly inspired by the serpent's genius of virulent wisdom than when he uttered, in a most characteristic hiss of sarcasm, a sentence as conclusive in its judgment as venomous in its malignity, describing Musset before he had reached middle age as "a young man

with a very fine career behind him"—("*un jeune homme d'un bien beau passé*")." Wilde let himself be ruined. And evidently, at that turning-point in his career, he had no choice in the matter. And yet, when I say choice, it must not be forgotten that the choice given him, when he was out on bail during his trial, was that of remaining in London and facing his fate, or of leaving England, which he was strongly advised to do.

When I was living in Fountain Court I avoided going to Wilde's trial: but Selwyn Image, among other friends of mine, kept me well informed of what was going on in those crowded Courts, as I knew that the reports in the newspapers were not to be relied on. When he was let out on bail, at the beginning of May, 1895, he had a respite of three weeks. Just then everything had been arranged for his escape by Frank Harris

(as he told me himself), but the accused man, who had not long before then known what the horror of a prison cell is, seeing his doom and dreading it, refused this offer. I turn to the pages of Yeats' *Trembling of the Veil*, where he says: 'I never before heard a man talking with perfect sentences, as if he had written them all overnight with labour and yet all spontaneously.' And when I dined with Wilde a few days afterwards, he began at once: 'I had to strain every nerve to equal Henley at all;' and I was too loyal to speak my thought: 'You and not he said all the brilliant things.' He said on that first meeting, 'The basis of literary friendship is mixing the poisoned bowl.' And Yeats adds (what, in fact, I saw myself), 'When the verdict was announced the harlots in the street outside danced upon the pavement.'

V

THE PLAYS

THE earliest thing Wilde wrote was a play in prose called *Vera, or the Nihilists*, written for the most part in excited language of this kind: 'Peace! ye gorged adders, peace!' The plot is melodramatic, and the whole action altogether futile; it is amusing to read now and discover the first ineffectual attempts to be witty. Prince Paul says to the Marquis de Poivraro: 'Ah! Marquis. I trust Madame la Marquise is well.' The Marquis answers: 'You ought to know better than I do, Prince Paul; you see more of her.' Whereat the Prince, bowing, replies: 'Perhaps I see more *in* her, Marquis.' Soon after *Vera* comes *The Duchess of Padua*. In this, and in the fragment of *The Floren-*

tine Tragedy, we see an attempt to write romantic drama. The end of *The Florentine Tragedy* is done on almost the same method as the end of the third act of *Lady Windermere's Fan*. It is meant to be a great climax, and it is really only a bad epigram. The merchant-husband, Simone, who is hated by his wife, Bianca, kills her lover (to whom she has cried: 'Kill him!') under her eyes. The stage direction instructs us:—

> He dies—Simone rises and looks at Bianca. She comes towards him as one dazed with wonder, and with outstretched arms.

BIANCA. Why
Did you not tell me you were so strong?
SIMONE. Why
Did you not tell me you were beautiful?

Then the curtain falls, and we are fed with a fruitless epigram. Now turn to

that scene which ends the third act of *Lady Windermere's Fan.* The appearance of Mrs Erlynne from Door R. is a great climax, because it is psychologically right and theatrically right. Her words, which seem to say nothing, are tragic, because they are the expression of a concealed heroism. The curtain falls on a suspense which leaves us breathless.

The Duchess of Padua is meant to be an imitation of Webster or Marston, a macabre tragedy of blood. It is meant to be passionate and heroic, and splendid in versification. The passion is mere ice; the speech, hackneyed, far-fetched, and cheap-bought, is offered at second hand. The murderous Duchess would go beyond Lady Macbeth, and wash, not only her hands, but also her soul. 'Can I not wash my hands? Ay, but my soul?' she exclaims. Her moods and her lover's toss to and fro from one to the other a

dozen times in less than twenty minutes in a corridor at the top of a staircase where the murder has just been committed. The time is past when lovers can say to one another:—

DUCHESS. And Passion sets a seal upon the lips.

GUIDO. Oh, with mine own life let me break that seal!

Still less can we listen to one of the same lovers, at their first meeting, when he elaborates on the spur of the moment this series of figures of speech:—

Nay, sweet, lift up your head,
Let me unlock those little scarlet doors
That shut in music, let me dive for coral
In your red lips, and I'll bear back a prize
Richer than all the gold the Griffon guards
In rude Armenia.

'These are but words, words, words,' as the Duchess comments on another occa-

sion. Even the frenzied speech in which the two lovers squabble with one another on the edge of death has no natural heat, no appropriate anguish.

Wilde's last attempt at romantic drama is, if not successful, filled with a strange fascination, not easy to define. *Salome* is difficult for us to dissociate from Beardsley's illustrations, in which what is icily perverse in the dialogue (it cannot be designated drama) becomes in the ironical designs pictorial, a series of poses. On the stage these poses are less decorative than on the page, though they have an effect of their own, not fine, but languid and horrible and frozen. To Wilde, passion was a thing to talk about with elaborate and coloured words. Salome is a doll, as many have imagined her, soulless, set in motion by some pitiless destiny, personified momentarily by her mother; Herod is a nodding mandarin in a Chinese

grotesque. So *The Sphinx* offers no subtlety, no heat of an Egyptian desert, no thrill in anything but the words and cadences; the poem, like *Salome*, is a sort of celebration of dark rites.

About the year 1891 the idea came to him that the abounding wit, which he had kept till then chiefly for the entertainment of his friends, could be turned quite naturally into a new kind of play. Sheridan was the best model at hand to learn from, and there were qualities of stage speech and action in which he could surpass him. Then might not Alfred de Musset show him some of the secrets of fine comedy? He had, to start with, a wit that was typically Irish in its promptness and spontaneity. His only rival in talk was Whistler, whose wit was unpleasantly bitter. The word sprang from Wilde's lips, some unsought nonsense, a flying paradox;

Whistler's was a sharper shaft, but it flew less readily. And now this inventiveness of speech found itself at home in the creation of a form of play which, in *Lady Windermere's Fan*, begins by being seriously and tragically comic, and ends in *The Importance of being Earnest*, which is a sort of sublime farce, meaningless and delightful.

Lady Windermere's Fan has been imitated since by popular playwrights, and Wilde was justified in saying:—

> I took the drama, the most objective form known to art, and made it as personal a mode of expression as the lyric or sonnet; at the same time I widened its range and enriched its characterisation.

One begins by admiring its wit; one ends by being convinced by its drama. What other dramatist of our age has concealed such ingenuity of plot under such ready wit; has presented life jesting so gaily on

the edge of a precipice, over which no one quite falls? A temperament is expressed in an epigram, and the speech comes naturally in its place. In *A Woman of No Importance* the epigrams almost obliterate the action until the end of the third act, almost every sentence being a separate piece of wit. Many of the epigrams are celebrated, almost classic ('The Book of Life begins with a man and a woman in a garden. It ends with Revelations.' 'The English country gentleman galloping after a fox —the unspeakable in full pursuit of the uneatable'), yet the click, click of them is after a time almost tedious. Even the stupid people never say stupid things.

A Woman of No Importance is scarcely so good, dramatically, as *Lady Windermere's Fan*, and *An Ideal Husband* is not so good as either, while *The Importance of being Earnest* is by far the most

perfect of the four. It is, however, really the least witty, and too serious in its parade of the circumstances, which are as winding and difficult as a maze. All are experimental, all have some ingenious difference, though the actual stage tricks do not vary much in method. There is always a fan, or a glove, or a letter, or a hand-bag by which somebody is incriminated or identified. Dramatically Lady Windermere's fan is more significant and more natural than Ibsen's 'vine leaves in the hair,' which is a bad symbol; and as for the hand-bag in *The Importance of being Earnest*, it is an unparalleled invention of its kind. That perfect play is nothing but delirious nonsense. 'Delightful work may be produced under burlesque and farcical conditions,' Wilde had written a few years before he wrote the play, and he added: 'And in work of this kind the artist in England is

allowed very great freedom.' It is a great freedom that he takes in making a work of art in the act of merely amusing us. The matter has been questioned, quite unnecessarily. A great wit who can condense that volatile essence into a permanent savour has his place among artists.

VI

DE PROFUNDIS

DE Profundis contains about the third part of a manuscript which Oscar Wilde sent from Reading Gaol to his literary executor, Robert Ross, on April 1, 1897. It was written in the form of a personal letter. The whole manuscript no doubt is, as Wilde says in sending it to his executor, 'the only document which really gives any explanation of my extraordinary behaviour'; but, as it stands, it is far from giving any such explanation. It contains, there is reason to believe, the best part of what is purely literary in it, but its literary interest can hardly, in the nature of the case, be of so much significance to us as its psychological interest. Has even enough been published to show fully what the writer calls 'my

mental development while in prison, and the inevitable evolution of my character and intellectual attitude towards life that has taken place'? It is doubtful. 'Some day,' he says in the letter from which I have quoted, 'the truth will have to be known, not necessarily in my lifetime; but I am not prepared to sit in the grotesque pillory they put me into, for all time.' 'I don't defend my conduct. I explain it,' he says, further. How much of the explanation is lost to us, with those two-thirds of the manuscript which we are not permitted to see?

What we see, what constitutes the greatest value of the book as it is, is as sincere as possible an attempt to write down the actual effect of prison solitude on one who had rarely been alone, and never without freedom in life. To me the most touching, because the most real, thing in it, is a little passage, brought in

merely as an illustration of an argument, in which he tells us how, when he was 'allowed by the doctor to have white bread to eat instead of the coarse black or brown bread of ordinary prison fare,' it seemed to him so great a delicacy that, he says, 'at the close of each meal I carefully eat whatever crumbs may be left on my tin plate, or have fallen on the rough towel that one uses as a cloth so as not to soil one's table; and I do so not from hunger—I get now quite sufficient food—but simply in order that nothing should be wasted of what is given me.' There is not much that is so simple, or so charming, or so direct as that; but there is a very earnest attempt to reckon with the great sorrowful facts of life, as they had come, one after another, upon him; to make, as the basis of that accepted sorrow, a new house of life, a new palace of art. There is a study of the life and

teaching of Christ, which, among many paradoxes, has many truths; and there are resolutions for a future which never came, whose sincerity is not to be questioned by their failure. Throughout, we see him face to face with the reality of things; we see him tested by that reality, we see him conscious that he is being tested, and we see (as he himself does not see) that he is unchanged, that he is incapable of change.

In this book we see reality come close to him, reveal its lineaments, which he has never yet seen through the veils which he has woven for its adornment: he sees it face to face, recognises, yet never realises it for what it is. Where another man might have 'seen an instant, and been saved,' he, seeing, is unable to grasp, unable to be saved; that is, taken out of himself. His nature is too unreal for him to be able, even through

suffering, to touch reality. What he touches is his own image of what he sees, and he begins at once to adorn the image that he has made, to hide its true lineaments away under new veils of his own weaving. And his prayer, in all sincerity, is that prayer which Francis Jammes has set down in these two lines:

Ayez pitié de moi, O mon Dieu, car j'ai peur
De ne pas compatir assez à la douleur.

He writes beautifully about sorrow, more beautifully because more truly than he has ever written. What, as he says, was to him little more than a phrase, when, in a story, he wrote, 'Is not He who made misery wiser than thou art?' has now become real; and he says it now more simply. But he does not say it simply. He must elaborate it with a conscious rhetoric, which keeps it always at the due distance from himself, and from us.

There is a passage referring to the

death of his mother, which, in the published English text, reads thus: 'No one knew how deeply I loved and honoured her. Her death was terrible to me; but I, once a lord of language, have no words in which to express my anguish and my shame.' Here the 'lord of language' may already seem a trifle self-conscious, but in the original manuscript the sentence continues: 'never even in the most perfect days of my development as an artist, could I have had words fit to bear so august a burden, or to move with sufficient stateliness of music through the purple pageant of my incommunicable woe.' Already he is playing with his sorrow, genuine as that sorrow no doubt was; and the words are not words of irresistible beauty, but of carefully heightened rhetoric. In another passage he describes one of his moods in prison, how 'I determined to commit suicide on the very day on which

I left prison. After a time that evil mood passed away, and I made up my mind to live, but to wear gloom as a king wears purple: never to smile again: to turn whatever house I entered into a house of mourning: to make my friends walk slowly in sadness with me: to teach them that melancholy is the true secret of life: to maim them with an alien sorrow: to mar them with my own pain. Now,' he adds, 'I feel quite differently.' But the mood, while it lasted, was a significant one: one of the moods of that drama which to him was life itself.

Perhaps the most revealing passage in the whole book is a passage omitted in the English version: 'I have said that to speak the truth is a painful thing. To be forced to tell lies is much worse. I remember as I was sitting in the dock on the occasion of my last trial, listening to Lockwood's appalling denunciation of

me—like a thing out of Tacitus, like a passage in Dante, like one of Savonarola's indictments of the Popes at Rome—and being sickened with horror at what I heard. Suddenly it occurred to me, "How splendid it would be if I was saying all this about myself!" I saw then at once that what is said of a man is nothing, the point is, who says it. A man's very highest moment is, I have no doubt at all, when he kneels in the dust and beats his breast, and tells all the sins of his life.' In that passage, which speaks straight, and has a fine eloquence in its simplicity, I seem to see the whole man summed up, and the secret of his life revealed. One sees that to him everything was drama, all the rest of the world and himself as well; himself indeed always at once the protagonist and the lonely king watching the play in the theatre emptied for his

pleasure. After reading this passage one can understand that to him sin was a crisis in a play, and punishment another crisis, and that he was thinking all the time of the fifth act and the bow at the fall of the curtain. For he was to be the writer of the play as well as the actor and the spectator. 'I treated art,' he says, 'as the supreme reality, and life as a mere mode of fiction.' A mode of drama, he should have said.

The passage from which I quote this sentence is more definite as a statement of Wilde's belief of himself, and his belief in what he had done, than any other passage in the book. 'I had genius,' he says, 'a distinguished name, high social position, brilliancy, intellectual daring: I made art a philosophy, and philosophy an art: I altered the minds of men and the colours of things: there was nothing I said or did that did

not make people wonder: I took the drama, the most objective form known to art, and made it as personal a mode of expression as the lyric or the sonnet at the same time that I widened its range and enriched its characterisation: drama, novel, poem in rhyme, poem in prose, subtle or fantastic dialogue, whatever I touched I made beautiful in a new mode of beauty: to truth itself I gave what is false no less than what is true as its rightful province, and showed that the false and the true are merely forms of intellectual existence: I treated art as the supreme reality, and life as a mere mode of fiction. I awoke the imagination of my century so that it created myth and legend around me. I summed up all systems in a phrase, and all existence in an epigram.'

That is scarcely even a challenge; it is a statement. There is no doubt that he

believed it; and that so great a master of irony should have exposed himself to the irony of rational judgment is a sufficient evidence that here, as in other matters, solitude and constraint brought him no nearer to a realisation of things as they were than he had been when, as he says in another place, 'I was to many an architect of style in art, the supreme arbiter to some.'

'An architect of style in art': certainly he was that, and there are pages in *De Profundis* which are among the finest pages he has written. The book should be read aloud; its eloquence is calculated for the voice, and a beauty which scarcely seems to be in these lucid phrases as one reads them silently comes into them as they are spoken. 'There is always something of an excellent talker about the writing of Mr Oscar Wilde,' said Walter Pater in his review of *Dorian*

Gray; and it was that quality, of course, which helped Wilde to make, in his plays of modern life, the only real works of art in that kind which have been produced in English since Sheridan, and finer work, in some ways, certainly, than Sheridan's. And as, for the most part, he was a personality rather than an artist, a personality certainly more interesting than any of his work, it is natural and right that what is best in that work should always suggest actual talk, the talk of one who spoke subtly, brilliantly, with a darting and leaping intelligence. He was always at his best when he wrote in dialogue, or, as here, in the form of a letter. Either form allowed him that kind of intellectual freedom which he required: the personal appeal, either with a mask or without it.

NOTE

A slight portion of this volume has appeared in literary journals, but these passages have been thoroughly revised so as to exclude ephemeral allusions from an original and more fully considered appreciation of Wilde.

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